COMMUNITY CAFÉS:
Building Parent Leadership and Strengthening New York State Families and Communities

Summary Report of the Pre-Orientation Interviews with 16 Community Café Teams
Fall 2012
PROMOTING COMMUNITY STRENGTH THROUGH STATE PARTNERSHIPS

The New York State Parenting Education Partnership¹ (NYSPEP) and the Children and Family Trust Fund (Trust Fund) of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services share the goal of promoting strong, stable families, and thriving communities. To contribute to this goal, NYSPEP and the Trust Fund have partnered to promote the Community Café approach as a tool for developing parent leadership, building community capacity to meet families’ needs, and strengthening New York families.

For five years, the Community Café approach has inspired the development of parent leadership in communities that believe meaningful conversations and local collaboration are integral to positive changes for children and families. In thirteen states, parents in communities, tribes, early learning settings, schools, health care services, faith-based organizations, and social service systems use the Community Café approach to invite people into conversations that explore ways to build protective factors for families using a strength-based, exploratory process. These conversations often spark leadership in parents, community members, and youth, and result in the strengthening of the social fabric that supports more resilient and well-connected communities.

In New York, NYSPEP and the Trust Fund are promoting Community Cafés as a way to increase parents’ voice in family service systems and to foster communication between these systems.

Our objectives are to:

- Enhance community based organizations’ capacity to support parent/family leaders in hosting Community Cafés;
- Identify and strengthen community supports that engage and protect families;
- Build parents’ capacity to help their families’ thrive; and
- Build community capacity to create action plans that address challenges affecting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and families.

BUILDING A STATE COMMUNITY CAFÉ LEADERSHIP TEAM

NYSPEP and the Trust Fund set out to grow the capacity of communities to host cafés in New York by developing a state-wide Community Café Leadership Team. It is our vision that this State Leadership Team will be led by parents who will have the experience, knowledge, and leadership skills needed to provide support and peer-networking for other parents and community members who are hosting cafés in their own communities.

As the first step toward developing the capacity needed to sustain a State Leadership Team, NYSPEP and the Trust Fund organized a competitive grant process to provide communities with financial and technical support to gain experience using the Community Café approach. The grant application asked community-based organizations to form teams comprised of organizational staff, community partners, and parent leaders, with the staff supporting the work of parent leaders to plan and host cafés in their communities. NYSPEP and the Trust Fund developed selection criteria for the grants.

¹ The New York State Parenting Education Partnership is convened by the New York State Council on Children and Families, Office of Mental Health, Office of Children and Family Services through the Children and Family Trust Fund, and Prevent Child Abuse New York.
to identify applicant organizations with previous café related experience or who demonstrated a commitment to parent leadership development, including Head Start programs, Family Resource Centers, Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, Perinatal Networks and Project LAUNCH sites. In all, 39 organizations applied with 16 selected to form community teams representing all corners of New York including Long Island, New York City, the Capital Region, the North Country, Western and Central New York\(^2\).

By accepting the grant funds, organizations agreed to form community teams to attend regional café orientations, participate in peer-learning and technical assistance activities, and provide NYSPEP with summary reports of the five cafés that teams are expected to host between October 2012 and May 2013. The progress of our efforts to implement cafés and to develop a State Leadership team will be supported and monitored by on-going communication with the teams and through the collection and synthesis of summary reports that capture the major themes of each café hosted. NYSPEP will synthesize the common themes of the café reports and distribute the summary reports to Community teams as well as our state partners.

NYSPEP is fortunate to have the support of the National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds to facilitate the orientations and to provide on-going technical assistance to NYSPEP and to the individual teams. The Alliance consultants also hosted pre-orientation, base-line interviews with each team using the Appreciative Inquiry process (described below) and will host follow-up interviews with each team in the spring of 2013. This report offers a synthesis of common themes extracted from the first interviews with teams. Using these pre- and post-interviews, the Alliance will develop a second report that summarizes the changes that teams experienced as a result of hosting cafés.

\(^2\) See the attachment at the end of this report for list of organizations that sponsor each community team.
**Foundations of the Community Café Approach**

The Community Café approach is intended to spark leadership to build the relationships needed to strengthen families. Parents learn about the five *Strengthening Families Protective Factors* ([www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org)) and the World Café process ([www.theworldcafé.org](http://www.theworldcafé.org)) from other parent leaders, then partner with community based organizations to host meaningful conversations designed to promote the protective factors. The Community Café approach also uses an *Appreciative Inquiry* process that focuses on the assets that already exist in the neighborhood and organization for strengthening families.

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### The Strengthening Families Protective Factors

**Parent Perspective**

1. **Parental Resilience (Courage)** - Resilience is the ability to manage and bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family’s life. It means finding ways to solve problems, building and sustaining trusting relationships including relationships with your own child, and knowing how to seek help when necessary.

2. **Social Connections (Community)** - Networks of support are essential to parents and also offer opportunities for people to “give back”, an important part of self-esteem as well as a benefit for the community. Isolated families may need extra help in reaching out to build positive relationships.

3. **Concrete Support in Times of Need (Health)** - Meeting basic economic needs like food, shelter, clothing and health care is essential for families to thrive. Likewise, when families encounter a crisis such as domestic violence, mental illness or substance abuse, adequate services and supports need to be in place to provide stability, treatment and help for family members to get through the crisis.

4. **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development (Freedom)** - Accurate information about child development and appropriate expectations for children’s behavior at every age help parents see their children and youth in a positive light and promote their healthy development. Information can come from many sources, including family members as well as parent education classes and surfing the internet.

5. **Nurturing and Attachment/Social and Emotional Competence of Children (Compassion)** - A child or youth’s ability to interact positively with others, self-regulate their behavior and effectively communicate their feelings has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults, and peers.

Taken from Center for the Study of Social Policy ([www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families](http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families))
Appreciative Inquiry
Appreciative Inquiry is the foundation of the Community Café approach. David Cooperrider and other researchers at Case Western University first coined the term in the 1970’s as an approach to organizational analysis and learning that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social organizational arrangements and processes. This approach shifts the focus from isolating problems and prescribing solutions, to identifying strengths that exist and building on them for continued success. It effectively disrupts the victim-risk factor-rescuer cycle that pervades many human systems today.

*Dream | Design | Discovery | Delivery - The four D’s*

The four D’s is part of the Appreciative Inquiry process. It is an iterative process that takes into account the non-linearity of community building. Within the scope of Community Cafés, it guides teams by inviting them to:

- **Dream** – of a community that fosters respect, equality, and inclusion based on the collective wisdom of its residents
- **Design** – questions and experiences that lead to meaningful conversations
- **Discover** – emerging themes and ideas as conversations unfold, listen rather than convince, learn rather than problem solve
- **Deliver** – safe, inclusive environments that honor each person as a contributor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Problem Solving</strong></th>
<th><strong>Appreciative Inquiry</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Felt Need” Identification of Problem</td>
<td>“Valuing “What is” (what gives life?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause Analysis</td>
<td>Envisioning “What might be?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solution Analysis</td>
<td>Dialoguing “What should be?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action Planning “Treatment”</td>
<td>Innovating “What would be?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor: Org. as problems to be solved</td>
<td>Metaphor: Org. as mystery to be embraced</td>
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SUMMARY OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEW PROCESS

Implementing the Community Café approach with the 16 teams began with Appreciative Inquiry Interviews. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions centered on the current reality, personal strengths and experiences, and the interplay between dreams/possibilities and actions. Understanding that the kinds of questions asked determine the responses, questions were crafted that provided space to appreciate what has worked in the past and envision what is possible based on community strengths. Each Appreciative Inquiry Interview served as baseline documentation of the starting point from which their transformation began. Interviews comprised of 60- to 90-minute conference calls were hosted by a representative from NYSPEP, a Community Café orientation host and note-taker. The orientation host and note-taker are members of the Community Café Collaborative (www.thecommunitycafe.com), the team of parents who founded and developed the Community Café approach. Community teams consistently expressed gratitude for the interview and many participants provided the feedback that the interview process was an opportunity to get to know each other better and think about their community more deeply.

The five questions asked in each interview were:

1. **How would you describe your community to someone who just moved there?**
   This question helped draw a picture of the current reality from multiple perspectives. People often responded with both the strengths and challenges they perceived in their communities and information that helped to frame the geographic, demographic, economic, and social contexts within which their communities exist.

2. **Tell a story of what it would look like for families if your community were more connected.**
   This question elicited candid responses about the goals and values of each team. Because “connected” is a broad term, it could be applied to any relationship or scope of work within the community.

3. **At some point, you decided to take action to help change your community. What conditions or circumstances led you to take action?**
   This question revealed intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that moved people to invest in community-building work and committed leadership.

4. **How could your personal cultural values and strengths help to improve the conditions of the community/neighborhood?**
   People had an opportunity to self-identify and share their own cultural values and individual strengths exposing their rich backgrounds. The conversation that followed this sometimes challenging question often offered a sense of validation and awareness of the importance of each person’s contributions to the community change process.

5. **What are your highest hopes and best ideas for families in your community to thrive?**
   The intentionality of the use of the word “thrive” generated concrete ideas, actions, and strategies from team members.
**Findings and Common Themes**

Sixty-one people participated in the conference calls, with an average of four people per team. Many teams brought parents into the conversations. During the 16 calls, resounding themes of the importance of growing partnerships with parents, bridging social divides, and fostering a sense of neighborhood were echoed across the state’s regions and communities.

Teams described challenges their communities face: institutional structures that reinforce the segregation of social groups; geographic barriers that add to feelings of isolation; and economic and environmental hardship that compromises the parent-child relationship, among others.

Teams from New York City and neighboring communities, including Long Island, spoke of the fear many undocumented families hold that prevents them from utilizing community support services. In particular, schools lack the ability to support families who speak languages other than English. Teams see Community Cafés as one way to make education more equitable by helping schools better understand their challenges and the challenges of other students of color. Similarly, cafés could help address the discrimination that Hispanic families encounter when interacting with insurance or loan officers, employers, business owners, and other community members.

Other teams highlighted a number of factors that contribute to parents' feelings of isolation. Apart from language barriers between parents and schools, service-providing organizations, businesses, and neighbors, parents who live in rural areas of upstate New York often lack access to affordable transportation. Teams from the Finger Lakes region of New York emphasized how getting to places like WIC offices and support groups is challenging without a personal vehicle. Because public transportation is often too time-consuming, infrequent, or lacks appropriate accommodation, parents remain at home. Current downsizing of industry has intensified the transportation challenge by requiring parents in rural communities to travel further to access services in larger cities.

Family structure is evolving in tandem with changing economic times. Several teams noted that more families look like grandparents raising grandchildren, single-parent families, and young parents raising children without strong parenting skills. In the Southern Tier and Capital Region, teams shared that large employers have shut down, subsequently changing the composition of their

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**Principles of Appreciative Inquiry**

1. There is some value in every organization and community.
2. Starting a change process from a position of strength adds power and possibility to the process.
3. Questions are a good tool for facilitating change.
4. The kinds of questions you ask determine what you will find.
5. Stories are an important part of information gathering.
6. Image (vision, dream) and action are linked.
7. Having a positive, powerful vision/dream empowers people to take action.
8. Getting the whole system involved helps bring about change.
local economies. Unemployment and marijuana and alcohol use are influences that limit how much families can thrive.

**Dream: Envisioning Thriving Communities**
The most recurring theme that threads these teams together is the sense of isolation and loneliness prevalent among parents in their communities. In call after call, teams spoke of the critical need for parents supporting other parents through material resource-sharing (carpools, child care, etc.), knowledge-sharing (parenting classes, information on local social service organizations, etc.), and social connections (play groups, parent support groups, and accessible communal spaces).

Teams from New York City and Long Island said their highest hopes for families is for parents to feel empowered to self-advocate and develop a trusting support network within their communities. Similarly, teams from Western New York focused on the need to share more parenting information. In both Rochester and the Ithaca area, teams hope that one day, parents will have a strong sense of self-efficacy that spreads from parent to child and parent to parent within the community and that unified voices can help to improve community conditions and educational opportunities for youth.

**Design: Strategies for Community-Building**
In order to craft experiences that lead to meaningful conversations, many teams are taking the following considerations into account: supporting parents with child care during events; assisting with transportation to and from cafés; finding a venue that is inviting/accessible for people of all cultures, backgrounds and abilities; timing the event so it is convenient for parents; building on existing relationships and social networks; promoting topics that are engaging and relevant to the community; and thinking about families who are not connected. Organizations are using this opportunity to partner with parents they have had difficulty engaging with in the past and designing more compelling invitations such as finding natural parent leaders in the community to assist with invitations.

In parts of upstate New York, teams are challenged to overcome the divide between long-time residents and a growing number of families new to their neighborhoods. The changing profile of cities like Rochester and Ithaca creates hidden social barriers based on class, race, and education level. Teams will rely on existing leadership in their communities to call forth people of all backgrounds and inspire them to work together on common issues. Several teams across the state currently implement a strengths-based approach that parallels the Appreciative Inquiry process. Although some teams are further along in discovering the purpose of their future cafés, all teams aspire to facilitate safe ways for parents to connect.

**Discover: Shared Values and Strengths and How to Build Community**
Each team conveyed their commitment to building community when asked to share their personal values and strengths. Café conversations may primarily focus on teams learning how to effectively develop relationships that strengthen families in their community. Many individuals responded that strong familial relationships are at the core of their work and personal lives. In addition, several teams agreed on the importance of carrying forward the kind of trust and support within the neighborhood that they experienced when they were growing up. Teams suggested through personal experience that volunteering, helping neighbors in times of need, and spending time
getting to know the people in their everyday lives are major contributors to positive child development.

Nearly every team asserted that the unique traditions, lifestyles, and behaviors that exist in different cultures are things to be valued. Seeing diversity as strength rather than a divisive force has allowed many people on these teams to see issues like structural racism and failing schools as the entire community’s problem. Their call to action is bridging the social barriers through Community Cafés.

*Deliver: Possibilities Using the Community Café Approach*

Through the Appreciative Interviews, it was clear that each team valued a community initiative that supported parent hosts and their leadership. As teams work to further integrate Community Cafés into their work, they will carry with them the shared interview experience as well as café hosting skills developed in the upcoming Community Café Orientations. Teams will be able to access ongoing support from the Community Café Collaborative as they design, prepare for, and host cafés.

**Next Steps**

Following the Appreciative Inquiry interview process summarized in this report, each of the 16 teams participated in a full day regional café orientations. This report will be followed by several others that will document the teams’ activities including a summary of these regional orientations. We will also be sharing reports from each of the cafés hosted by community teams which will provide our state level partners insight from communities about what they need to support healthy, strong families.

To ensure that community teams are able to support parent leaders in hosting cafés in their communities, NYSPEP will be facilitating conference calls with community teams on a regular basis as well as assessing the need for additional training in parent leadership, the Appreciative Inquiry process, and the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework. By leveraging the network of its membership and those of its state level partners, NYSPEP and the Trust Fund will also be able to assist teams in identifying community partners that can contribute to their efforts.

In addition to providing ongoing support to teams facilitating peer networking opportunities, and sharing what we learn from teams hosting cafés, NYSPEP and the Trust Fund will be working to build state level capacity to support and sustain efforts to host cafés at a community level and to develop a state leadership team. By building this internal state capacity, we will be able to support additional communities in hosting cafés, which will in turn, increase parent and community voice in state level policy development.
Celebration cafe

- Is it good for the children?
- How are we making it good/what considerations?
- How am I? If I'm happy my kids are happy.
- What if we had a common goal for everybody's kids to be happy and educated?
- If we don't educate our kids, how can we educate our children?
- How do we create communities to support children?
- What would we say if we spoke with one voice?

Community cafe

- Learn from the eagles
- Speak from your heart
- What are the powerful questions that can bring us together?
- What do we have in common?
- What resources are there?
- How do we get along?

Aug 2, 08

How can we...
- value differences?
- care for children?
- come together?
- What mistakes haven't we made yet?

Can we work together and end social isolation?
## Community Cafés: Building Parent Leadership and Strengthening New York State Families Competitive Grant Awardees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Team Sponsoring Organization</th>
<th>Contact Name</th>
<th>Regional Orientation Site</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Resource Center of Crestwood Children’s Center</td>
<td>Mary Jo Brach</td>
<td>Rochester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Coordinated Child Development Program</td>
<td>Cathy Canarvis</td>
<td>Rochester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne County Action Program Inc</td>
<td>Kimberly Decker</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornell Cooperative Extension of Livingston County</td>
<td>Donna Horton</td>
<td>Rochester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abyssinian Development Corporation</td>
<td>Orlando Swinton</td>
<td>East Harlem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years Institute</td>
<td>Colleen Multari</td>
<td>East Harlem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Program Center of Long Island</td>
<td>Mary Ellen Butcher</td>
<td>East Harlem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elmhurst Community Partnership Project</td>
<td>Shannon Mancuso</td>
<td>East Harlem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro Action of Steuben and Yates Inc</td>
<td>Dawn Brucie</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County</td>
<td>Nancy Potter</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. John Gavras Center</td>
<td>Nancy Tehan</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Enrichment Network</td>
<td>Mary Catherine Robinson</td>
<td>Ithaca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk Valley Community Action Agency</td>
<td>Pat Lawson</td>
<td>Albany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Coordinating Council of North Country</td>
<td>Jamie Basiliere</td>
<td>Albany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Autism Society of the Greater Capital Region</td>
<td>Janine Kruiswijk</td>
<td>Albany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Community Human Services</td>
<td>Renee Ramsey</td>
<td>Albany</td>
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If you would like to learn more about Community Cafès, contact Liz Belsito at 518-474-0158 or by email at Elizabeth.belsito@ccf.ny.gov.

This report was developed in partnership by the New York State Parenting Education Partnership, the NYS Office of Children and Family Services Children and Family Trust Fund, and the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds.